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Mountains at Work. The Geopolitics of Refuge in the Clarée Valley

Pierre Chomette

- 1 Since 2017, the media has focused particularly on the valleys in the Hautes-Alpes department. Journalists have been reporting on how the police and gendarmes track what they call “migrants” and seek to bar them from gaining access to French territory. This militarization of the space, whose visibility fluctuates over time (Bachelierie, 2020), relates to tens of square kilometers stretching from the Échelle and Montgenèvre passes to Briançon. Exiled people are forced to take more discreet but also longer and more perilous paths. They are purposefully put in danger as they have to deal with a hostile environment and sometimes perish there. Various collective activities have been initiated to provide assistance to people crossing the mountains. These activities highlight the political issues of the ongoing socio-spatial segregation: The police physically separate social groups from each other and treat them in different ways. These collectives formulate discourses that can be based on a demand for “mountain solidarity” and an emphasis on certain episodes from local history. This situation compels us to investigate Alpine mobilizations – from their impact on how these spaces are inhabited to the ambiguity of the notion of refuge.
- 2 This article considers the notion of “mountain-refuge” as one that is produced by a geopolitics of local memories. It investigates the way in which recollections of collective mobilizations are deployed to serve particular interests and essentialize discourses relating to the “mountain.” This research proposes going beyond the classical conception of the refuge as a material place of asylum for exiled populations: It considers the refuge as a set of constructed images that can be appreciated by turning to the notion of a “geographical imaginary” (Debarbieux, 2015). This imaginary is used by collectives for a variety of reasons and is based on geohistorical references. This article analyzes and compares the discourses developed around ecological mobilizations at the end of the 20th century in the Clarée Valley, as well as those

produced by people resisting the socio-spatial segregation of exiled people in the Briançon area. It postulates that linking questions of ecology and exile enables us to think about the theme of the refuge in a new way.

- 3 The analysis is mainly inspired by critical geography. In particular, the anarchist scientific revival represented in geography (Springer, 2018) and anthropology (Graeber, 2018) is mobilized. This approach highlights “infra-political” processes (Scott, 2009). From a pragmatic posture, it considers “everyone’s combined experience” by studying their “grammars” (Pereira, 2013; Lendaro, 2018). By disqualifying romantic approaches and geo-determinist explanations, critical geography makes it possible to consider the mountain as an open social system resulting from social relations without falling into the trap of methodological nationalism or alpine-centrism (Reclus, 1882). Moreover, the mountains are studied by taking into account the diversity of the imaginations they contain (Bozonnet, 1992). This approach includes the “naturalization” of mountain inhabitants, who in the process are transformed into “mountain dwellers” (*montagnard-es*), that is, pure “reflections of their environment” (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010). The issue of the mountain’s essentialization is used to consider the tendency to reduce this space to a fixed and innate essence, independent of human activity. We also take a critical perspective on the development of mountain areas and the commodification of their amenities (Keucheyan, 2014; Vidalou, 2017; Costa, 2018) to consider the “refuge value” of these spaces.
- 4 The hypotheses are informed by a study of the Clarée Valley conducted during four months of fieldwork in La Vachette in the summer and autumn of 2019. This village is both a gateway to the valley and where the roads leading from the Échelle and Montgenèvre passes toward Briançon intersect each other. It is located at the confluence of political, economic, and tourist flows. Living there helps in setting up the socio-historic and ethnographic methods of investigation. First of all, particular attention is given to forms of discursive and material valorization of local historical events, especially those relayed by political and tourist players. Written productions about the region are also material that is utilized to understand how the territory becomes part of a narrative (historical surveys, novels, tourist guides, regional daily press, archives, etc.). Finally, the research was enriched by a field notebook and (often informal) interviews with about 20 inhabitants, tourists, and professionals in the region.
- 5 First, the article reviews the history of resistance to development projects in the Clarée Valley. Using the figure of Émilie Carles, it indicates the economic and political interest in pacifying local memories and in constructing the territory as a refuge. Then, the more recent socio-spatial segregation of the exiled people in the Briançonnais is studied to show that similar mechanisms and grammars are deployed there, too. Finally, we note a trend toward the renaturalization of spaces where there have been territorial struggles and discuss the ambiguity of this process because of these spaces’ “refuge value.”

Defending the valley against development projects

- 6 From the 18th to the early 20th century, the use conflicts over the Clarée Valley, particularly around the Échelle border pass (Marchello and Siestrunk, 1991; Siestrunk, 2004), may be labeled as part of a geopolitics of development. The military,

tourists, engineers, and business communities have all appropriated space, or are planning to do so, from competing perspectives. In the early 1970s, a proposed transalpine highway through the Clarée Valley was taking shape: the “Fos-Turin fast track.” Some associations opposed “any project for an expressway or motorway that would destroy valley life and arable land and drive farmers off their land –nature-loving tourists, cross-country ski enthusiasts, beneficiaries of the climatic virtues of the Briançon region– and dispossess them of the pristine natural heritage that is the Clarée Valley” (Collectif de défense et de développement de la vallée de la Clarée et de la vallée Etroite, 2003).¹

- 7 The opposition movement gradually gained in popularity. Its demonstrations, festivals, and petitions were covered by the local media, but it is above all Émilie Carles’s charismatic personality that drew the national media’s attention. Her autobiography, *A Life of Her Own: A Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France* (*Une Soupe aux herbes sauvages*, literally ‘A Wild Herb Soup’), was published in 1978 (Carles, 1978). Her talks were collected and edited by journalist Robert Destanque. The book found immediate success.

Figure 1: Émilie Carles hosted by Bernard Pivot for the broadcast “Femmes femmes femmes,” *Apostrophes*, no. 132, 10 February 1978, Antenne 2



Credits: INA (Leteuil Jean-Pierre), accessed 17 April 2020, <https://madelen.ina.fr/programme/femmes-femmes-femmes>

- 8 As a result, the road project was soon suspended. The success of this mobilization is often attributed to the heroic and extraordinary qualities of Émilie Carles. Her love for the valley, her assertiveness, and the human warmth emanating from the stories of her misfortunes could win her sympathy from anyone. However, there are other factors that explain why the project was abandoned and add nuance to the relevance of the

hegemonic story about the “valley of resistance” that would have been defended by peasants acting in lockstep with Émilie Carles.

- 9 The protests in Plogoff and Creys-Malville (against proposed nuclear power stations) and in Larzac (against a planned military camp extension) took on a national dimension and happened at the same time as the mobilizations in Clarée. A few kilometers from the valley, the La Grave cable car project was sabotaged with explosives on 17 November 1976. The specter of a “larzacization”² was certainly one of the reasons why the project was abandoned. This new spread of political ecology was also connected to a change in the planning doctrine as embodied in the Vallouise speech delivered by President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1977, which put an end to the “snow plans” that had been in the works since 1964 to develop access to mountain leisure activities by constructing high-altitude resorts.³
- 10 The valley’s resettlement by new “ecological” households (Tane, 2018) –part of the “back-to-the-land” movement (Léger and Hervieu, 1979)– and the aspirations of mainly upper-class tourists (Lauginie, 1985) also explain the success of this mobilization. The valley was gradually turning the “wilderness” into its main resource and an element to make it stand out from its competitors in the context of tourism. However, the tourism-oriented development of the valley was creating tension on the local scene (Massoneau, 1996) as it did not benefit the families who were already settled in the valley. Most of them did not have the necessary capital to invest in tourist infrastructure (Garnon, 1976).
- 11 Despite the success of these collective mobilizations and those of 1980-81 against an uranium mining project in Névache, a new tunnel project under the Échelle pass, albeit this time solely by rail, reemerged at the end of the 1980s. The “Collectif de défense de la vallée de la Clarée” claimed the legacy of the fight against the highway and was developing a similar repertoire of action. In 1990, 1,500 people met at the Échelle pass to celebrate the recent announcements regarding the possibility of the valley receiving protected status.⁴ Finally, in the summer of 1992, while the collective continued its activities and was considering blocking the Tour de France, the decree granting the entire valley protected status was published in the *Journal Officiel*.

Figure 2: Davin Xavier, “1500 personnes pour la Clarée,” *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 7 August 1990



Credit: Photograph taken by the author, from the collection of the Hautes-Alpes departmental archives.

- 12 Thus, the Clarée Valley appears to be a territory targeted by various political, economic, and logistical interests. Not only road, rail, and mining projects but also ski lifts to neighboring resorts and large tourist infrastructure projects are examples of how the valley continues to be sought after. Military appropriation of the territory, in years gone by and continuing into the present,⁵ as well as the police activity in the area, boosted in recent years by a change in methods (Bachelier, 2019), underscore the geopolitical interest in this area.
- 13 The achievements and memories of struggle described above, as well as a specific mode of economic development, construct the valley as a territory that is hostile to major development projects. The figure of Émilie Carles makes it possible to constitute an “invaluable heritage, a notoriety that produces economic benefits but also constitutes a network of virtual defenders that can easily be mobilized” (Collectif Clarée, 2003). This hegemonic narrative presents the valley as a refuge of “preserved nature” and “authentic mountain life” and depicts its inhabitants as “resistance fighters” always ready to mobilize whenever there is a threat of development.

Telling the story of the Clarée through Émilie Carles

- 14 The importance of Émilie Carles in the local discourses of dissent is also illustrated in other types of publications. It can be found in Italy, in the nearby Val di Susa, in some “No TAV”⁶ discourses. In his novel *Très haute tension*, the mountaineer Lionel Daudet offers a story of the contradictory trajectories of three friends involved in constructing and opposing the very high voltage lines in the Haute-Durance Valley (Daudet, 2018). After clearly stating that, “unlike Italians, Corsicans, Basques, or Bretons, the people of the Hautes-Alpes do not have a long tradition of struggle,” he describes Émilie Carles as the “figurehead of the Hautes-Alpes, a teacher and a resistance fighter, very committed in the 1970s against a highway aimed at reaching Italy and transforming the priceless lands of the Clarée into a sordid corridor for trucks” (Daudet, 2018, p. 112).
- 15 Journalist Eric de Kermel also published a novel serving his ecological commitments entitled *Mon cœur contre la terre* (de Kermel, 2019). A plea to preserve the Clarée Valley, his book is an initiation story. At the age of 50, Ana leaves Paris to return to the Clarée, which is where she grew up. Staying at a mountain refuge located in the Haute-Vallée, she uses her relationship with the environment and the mountains to rebuild herself after a burnout. With a preface by Cyril Dion (the first director of the “Colibris Movement”), the novel inevitably refers to Émilie Carles, who ranks “in the pantheon of the valley’s most famous personalities” (p. 105), and her self-biography, which “was one of the essential reads from the ’68 generation, in the same way as Kerouac or Aldo Leopold” (p. 105):
- “An ode to the happiness found in the simple things of rural life, the conviviality of vigils around the fireplace, pacifism, and education. Émilie Carles became a star during her lifetime, and the primary school bears her name. Émilie has a lot to do with the valley becoming a territory that should be protected at all costs. An Alpine symbol of the same order as Larzac for the Massif Central or Plogoff in Bretagne” (p. 105).
- 16 De Kermel shows what the valley has become in the 21st century –or rather, what the valley has become for those who project and talk about it. It represents the “original mountain”: preserved and therapeutic, resistant and authentic. This is how the author

can write the following: “Today, we need Giono and his Contadourians [...]. The Contadour plateau and its sheepfolds are like the Clarée Valley, the Aubrac, or the Lure Mountains; they are territories where man can take a break. Take some distance to separate that which is secondary from that which is essential” (p. 111). He logically comes to naturalize and idealize the inhabitants: “In one night, the same water that falls as rain on the head of the depressed Parisian turns into crystals to create wonderful décor for the high-altitude inhabitant. It profoundly changes their relationship with the seasons, just like the psyche of the man of the plains or of the mountains” (p. 115). Also, quoting Victor Hugo and his book *The Alps and Pyrenees*, he affirms an Edenic thought of mountains: “One page has its corner turned over: ‘Mountain-tops are for us unknown worlds. There vegetates, blooms, and palpitates a refuge nature living by itself. [...] Man is afar, nature is tranquil. [...] On the mountain-top, the soul is lifted, the heart is purified. The thought takes its part in this profound peace’” (p. 189).

- 17 These two recent and nationally distributed novels show how memories or collective mobilizations are still politically produced today. Émilie Carles’s memory seems to be preserved by actors who claim to be a part of her ecological and humanist legacy. For example, the Collectif Clarée organizes occasional broadcasts of the 1997 film directed by Alain Bonnot, as well as events where a wild herb soup is prepared and eaten collectively.⁷ Her legacy is also promoted by institutional actors. In 1997, the Val-des-Prés municipality named the local school after her. In front of the town hall, there is also an educational space presenting the different plants that Émilie Carles used to prepare her soup. In addition, the Briançonnais community of communes has put up a glass plate on its former house-hotel, “Les Arcades,” that marks it as one of the major sites in the “Cultural Network of the Hautes-Vallées.” It is accompanied by a QR code that takes the user to a brief biography of Émilie Carles.
- 18 In this way, these memories are used for economic purposes – in particular, to promote tourism. The notion of “territorial marketing” describes this strategic narrative of a space with the aim of strengthening its economic appeal. In the 2019 edition of its paper, the Hautes-Vallées Tourist Office devoted an article to Émilie Carles.⁸ In it, she is described as a “fervent defender of her valley [who] has had a lasting impact on the history of the Clarée Valley.” A few years ago, the tourist office also organized guided tours to follow in her footsteps in Val-des-Prés. Even today, most tourist establishments (hotels, shops, restaurants) sell or provide access to her famous book. Some mention her and her struggles on websites where they promote their activity. It is easy to understand the interest in making use of such a historical figure for the sake of a tourism that proclaims itself “soft” but remains “industrial” (Christin, 2017). Given the context of tourism competition between regions, strategies are being developed to draw and keep tourists (Debarbieux, Del Biaggio and Petite, 2008). The patrimonialization of a figure from an ecological fight is one such a strategy. This promotion of an idealized era and an idealized space contrasts with the clearly visible agricultural decline, the forests encroaching on formerly cultivated land, and the very strong pressure of cars on roads during school holidays. These elements affirm the antagonism between a “marvelous” Haute-Vallée (in Névache) and a “polluted” Basse-Vallée (around Val-des-Prés).

'The unworthy old lady'

- 19 Despite the impression from the outside, the memory of Émilie Carles is still alive and painful. Its institutionalization went hand in hand with a neutralization of her acerbity and a process of pacification that goes further than her mythification.
- 20 Long before the publication of *A Life of Her Own* in 1978, Émilie Carles (1900–1979) had already polarized the valley. Her life followed an unusual trajectory for the time. She was one of a very few young women in the valley to pursue higher education. She obtained a teaching diploma in Paris and, in 1923, returned to Val-des-Prés to work. She lived in the family home, nicknamed “the castle” because it was the largest in the valley. In 1928, she married Jean Carles, a house painter from the Ardèche, who was both a pacifist and an anarchist. Besides being a stranger to the valley, he did not hide his political ideas, which sparked some resistance. In 1936, “the castle” became “Les Arcades,” a hostel that experienced a Golden Age thanks to the advent of paid holidays. Most of its residents were “pacifists” (p. 179)⁹ and “rabid individualists” (p. 180) because Émilie and Jean published advertisements in libertarian newspapers such as “La Patrie Humaine” and “L’En-Dehors.” They announced: “Room and board in a rustic setting, moderate prices. At Les Arcades, you will be among comrades in a congenial family atmosphere” (pp. 179–180). The couple’s isolation increased during the Second World War. Their libertarian and pacifist ideas were tolerated even less in “a country where Pétainism would flourish more than might have been expected” (p. 198) and where “when a few Germans came by, they all but licked their boots” (p. 209). Logically, Jean Carles was put at the head of a hostage list.
- 21 When *A Life of Her Own* was published, it found immediate success. The book was quickly translated into many languages, and millions of copies were sold. Émilie Carles was highly noticed by the press in a national environment that is favorable to memoirs. The oil crisis, the decline of a consumer society searching for roots, the back-to-the-land movement, and a new regionalist spirit are all elements that favored the book and its distribution:

“As much as we had believed in technology and technocrats, we chose new heroes, some small, humble, and forgotten. Memory bearers are as sought after as dynamic executives were not so long ago. Political authorities welcome these amalgamations of personal memories, of daily life in the past, and of a no-frills ecology, those of the elders” (Siestrunck, 1999).

Figure 3: X. D., “Une publicité américaine,” *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 7 June 1992

CULTURE

Une publicité américaine

“La soupe aux herbes sauvages” d’Emilie Carles vient d’être traduite aux Etats-Unis. Le New-York Times a consacré la première page de son supplément littéraire à cet ouvrage

Plusieurs millions d’Américains ont découvert dimanche dernier, à la une du *Book review* le supplément littéraire du *New-York Times*, le visage d’Emilie Carles. Douze ans après sa sortie, *La soupe aux herbes sauvages* a été traduite en anglais par Avriel H. Goldberger, professeur de français à l’université d’Hofstar. *A life of her own* qui est dans les rayons des librairies américaines depuis quelques semaines seulement connaît un large succès. A cette occasion, Mavis Gallant a consacré un long article dans le quotidien new-yorkais à l’histoire d’Emilie Carles, féministe avant l’heure.

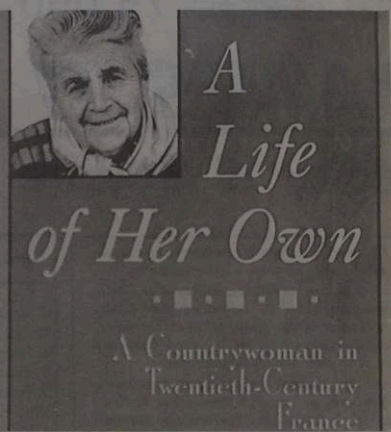
■ **Féministe et anarchiste**
L’auteur de cette traduction, Avriel Goldberger est littéralement amoureuse de la France et s’y rend régulièrement. L’an dernier, alors qu’elle travaillait sur cet ouvrage elle a écrit à Catherine Fromm, directrice de la bibliothèque municipale pour obtenir des traductions de vocables en patois. Puis, avec son époux, elle a fait le déplacement dans les Hautes-Alpes pour découvrir les charmes de l’été dans la Clarée.

Avriel Goldberger a été très sensible à la stature d’Emilie Carles, féministe et écologiste qui « aimait la vie et avait décidé de faire quelque chose de son existence. » Ce tempérament hors du commun lui a d’ailleurs inspiré le titre anglais *A life of her own*. Anarchiste comme son époux, Emilie Carles était une militante écologiste dans l’âme. Elle fut l’une des premières à revendiquer le classement de la Clarée. En 1976, elle confiait à Roger Tréfeu, un confrère de *Témoignage chrétien* les germes de son livre et ceux du classement.

A sa sortie en 1977, l’ouvrage écrit par Emilie Carles et Robert Desnauque a été un best-seller vendu à plus de deux millions d’exemplaires. Des millions de lecteurs se sont émus sur la vie de cette femme qui a côtoyé le malheur toute sa vie sans perdre le goût du bonheur pour les autres.

■ **Polémiques adoucies**
A Val-des-Prés, dans le hameau de l’institutrice, on ne lui a guère pardonné de coucher sur le papier, sans fioritures et avec franc-parler, les histoires du village. Si les détails paraissent bien anonymes voire anodins vus de l’extérieur, ils ont pris une grande importance dans le village où, pour parler familièrement, tout le monde s’est reconnu. Aujourd’hui, douze ans après la mort d’Emilie Carles, le temps a adouci les polémiques et l’édition américaine ne suscitera pas le même émoi. A moins que des centaines d’Américains bedonnants, la casquette de base-ball vissée sur le crâne et le hamburger dans la main viennent demander, en mâchant leur chewing-gum comment est mort le cantonnier.

X.D.



La couverture de la traduction américaine par Avriel H. Goldberger de “La soupe aux herbes sauvages”.

Credits: Photograph taken by the author, from the collection of the Hautes-Alpes departmental archives.

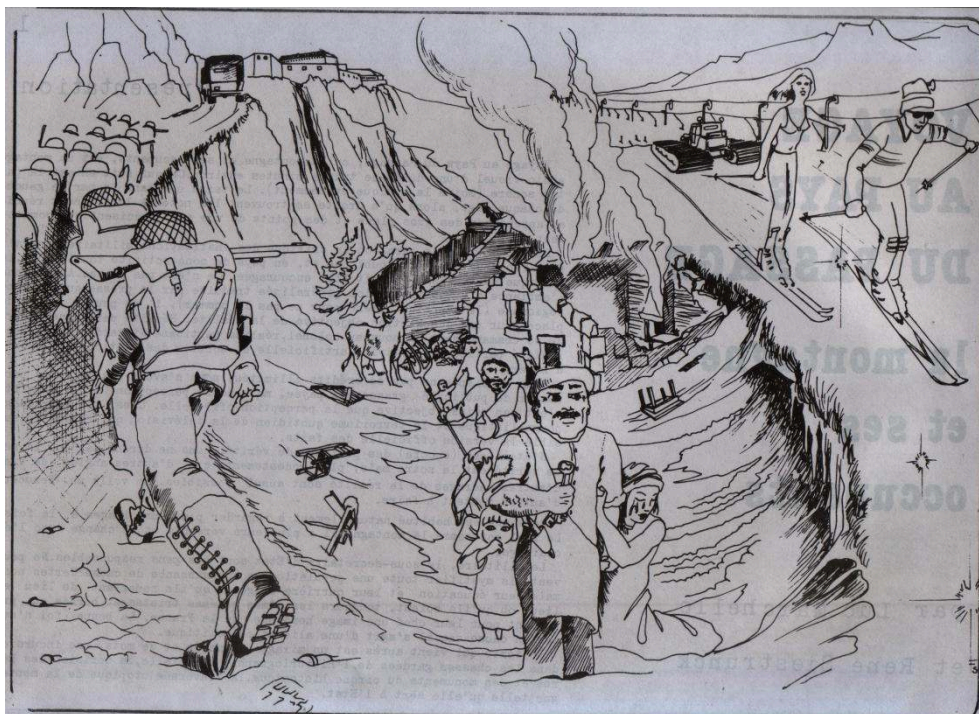
- 22 However, this national and even international success corresponds to “a phenomenon of being almost total rejected by her own village and the Clarée Valley more generally” (Rabi, 2000). The author was ostracized until her death in 1979. Some residents of Val-des-Prés felt ridiculed and betrayed by Émilie Carles’s story. Indeed, her narrative is not particularly complimentary: “I think there are no words strong enough to describe that brutish life. The Middle Ages, perhaps, but I wonder whether people were not more civilized in those days” (p. 70). According to her, “village relationships were often marked by that ancient primitivism” (p. 105). Inhabitants of this “backward region” (p. 225) “don’t say what they think [...] never read anything” (p. 184) and “always followed the mayor like sheep” (p. 209). She also advocated a very particular vision of her educational mission: almost “civilizing.” At school, she fought against patriarchy, work-related exhaustion, alcoholism, superstition, chauvinism, and savings, which were “another plague” (p. 228). She attacked the national narrative (p. 217) and does not spare her students’ parents: “They were the ones who held up progress and kept the new ideas from taking hold” (p. 107).
- 23 What made her “the unworthy old lady of Val-des-Prés”¹⁰ is also that she had broken a pact: “There is the memory of the village, of the tribe, the tribe’s dead, and also the stories of the tribe and the settling of accounts that is resolved without any intervention by an outside authority, everything that forms the secret and the pact: One does not reveal to others what is at the very depths of the collective memory. Here, violating the taboo leads to exclusion” (Rabi, 2000). Even though she had changed the names of people and places in certain parts of the book, some of the inhabitants

recognized themselves. This rejection persists to this day, and it is sometimes difficult to talk about Carles with locals in the valley.

- 24 As a result, the political, economic, and institutional exploitation of the memories of collective mobilizations, and above all of Émilie Carles, meant pacifying them. This depoliticization is achieved by neutralizing their subversive aspects and by ignoring the divisions – even the suffering – that they caused. Contemporary discourses on Émilie Carles tend to present her as a hero, a progressive, and a secular teacher or a consensual mountain ecologist in love with her valley. It is very rare for these discussions to mention her anarchist convictions, even though she refers to them repeatedly throughout her work. Her struggle was only marginally concerned with defending the Clarée Valley and above all focused on war, capitalism, and injustice, wherever they occurred.

Crossing the valley

Figure 4: Siestrunk, René (ed.), “Voyage au pays du passage”, *Transhumances*, no. 8, January 1980, Val-des-Prés



Credits: Photograph by the author, from the illustration signed FS on page 2.

- 25 The episode of the degradation of the headstone in Col de l'Échelle in June 2019¹¹ reveals the processes of the consensualization and mythification of memories. Here, the memory of the glorious victory of the Resistance is shared and defended by a broad political spectrum. The degradation of the monument and the adjacent chapel by inscriptions against borders and police was condemned by Christian Estrosi, as well as the Minister of the Interior and “the anarchists of 05.”¹² The territorial consensus is produced by the smoothing of historical contradictions, which are particularly blatant in the case of mythical memories of the Resistance and Émilie Carles, and the stigmatization of struggles that involve heavy political conflict. In the Briançon area,

border mobilizations are strengthened by these memories and update them. They form part of the political work of the local recollections presented above.

- 26 Four inhabitants of the Briançon area showing solidarity with exiled people gave an interview to Médiapart in December 2018.¹³ One of them spoke about the historical references that structure local political practices:

“If we look at the 13th and 14th centuries, there were persecutions of the Waldensians [...] who came to seek refuge in the Alpine valleys, particularly in the Freissinières and Vallouise valleys, and then, on the Italian side, in the Val Pellice, which is adjacent to the Briançon border. Then there were all the Piedmontese who passed through there in the 19th century, thousands and thousands of Piedmontese crossing these passes to flee misery. These passes have always been places of transit, since antiquity. Moreover, in a leaflet that can be found at the tourist office, the Montgenèvre commune is proud to be a ‘land of migration since antiquity.’ [...] There is also the whole question of anti-fascist resistance, especially on the Italian side, where the partisans with the Garibaldi brigades liberated Turin from the yoke of the fascists. [...] Mountains have always been places of refuge and resistance.”

- 27 The grammars of struggle at the local level are based on these multiple referents and the legacy of Émilie Carles. The actors who show solidarity with exiled people claim these referents, particularly when the local legitimacy of their actions is discussed. Thus, the figure of Émilie Carles can be used as an authoritative argument. These grammars are also connected to an institutionalized and “cross-border memory” (Granet-Abisset, 2016) of the Escartons Republic (1343 to 1789),¹⁴ which was a period during which the territories of Briançon enjoyed a particular fiscal status and strong political autonomy.¹⁵ Finally, all these referents constitute a geo-historical discourse shared by the majority of actors involved in collective local mobilizations.
- 28 This corpus, whose contours have been modified by multiple translations and interpretations even as it constitutes a constructed and dynamic common reference base, is conveyed in parallel with the trend of essentializing the mountains and naturalizing their people. The majority of discourses that claim to be supportive of exiled people crossing the Briançon region are based on a common grammar: the “humanitarian emergency.” Some of them, especially those that receive the most media coverage, illustrate this tension. For example, a high-altitude mountain guide explains: “It’s the mountain dweller’s reflex and is identical to that of sailors; we must organize ourselves so that no one sleeps outside” (Collectif, 2019). Later in the same book, referring to the gendarmes’ destruction of a shelter (used by exiled people and those who are in solidarity with them), the guide comments: “These gendarmes can’t be mountain dwellers!” In May 2018, in a text written by Erri De Luca, who supports the Briançon solidarity movement, we read: “We are mountain people. For centuries, we’ve been accompanying those who must cross the border to find shelter. The mountains help us with their countless trails.”¹⁶
- 29 These practices of showing solidarity are rooted in an “old cultural fund” (Siestrunck, 2019) that is shared by the mountain people: “Today’s marauders recall the origin, on a voluntary basis, of a mountain rescue” (Siestrunck, 2019). Providing assistance can be seen as a moral duty in line with one’s experience of the mountain environment. The “mountain dweller” has expertise in this space. However, these practices have often been turned into a narrative since the “mountain dweller” has been essentialized according to criteria that are naturalistic rather than historical. This gesture corresponds to not only a defensive strategy that borrows a consensual discourse to

deal with the criminalization of solidarities but also the effect of their spectacle-like media coverage. However, this dynamic does not enjoy unanimous approval. A mid-mountain guide expresses “his frank disapproval of the media, whose coverage establishes a natural and essential link between mutual aid and the supposed intrinsic qualities of the mountain community” (Borgnet, 2018). Saxo, an activist from Briançon interviewed by Nunatak magazine, states:

“When the media comes to Briançon, journalists are there for a few days, and they want to spend a day in the mountains to follow the marauders, as if they were boarding a rescue boat in the Mediterranean, except that you are selling another product: the mountain pass. So there is a kind of mythification of the mountain and of the supportive mountain dwellers, as if all mountain people were necessarily united... [...] The media prefers to portray the guides as some kind of heroes, whereas these guides are more interested in mountain running with clients, in performance, but not with undocumented migrants. [...] The guides correspond to the need for a myth. [...] There is this invasive image of high-altitude mountain guides, as if you have to be a superman to help people cross” (Nunatak, 2018).

- 30 The difference in judicial treatment of those accused of “facilitating entry into French territory” corresponds to this heroization of the “humanist guide marauder.” If the “smuggler” does not have social origins that are perceived as “good,” if he does not claim that his act has a political character, or if his case is not publicized in the media by the associations, the “humanitarian motive” invoked by those who stand in solidarity is never accepted, and “smugglers” are convicted and receive heavy prison sentences.¹⁷ This situation occurs in a climate of general indifference because the “smugglers” embody the common enemy of the border actors and the leading repulsive figure: criminals who abuse the vulnerability of exiled people.
- 31 The rescue spectacle carried out by those who are in solidarity, as well as its corollary, which is the staging of brutal and racist police actions in a hostile environment, produce distinct and concomitant humanitarian and security discourses. As in Lampedusa (Cuttita, 2015), these discourses constitute two sides of the same sensational and hegemonic narrative. It reinforces perceptions of the mountain as a legitimate border. In the same way, the theme of the “mountain refuges” is reactivated by media and activist grammars in response to the police’s use of Alpine geomorphology. Historically, this theme corresponds to a territorial materiality resulting from the Second World War –namely, that of the rescue of Jews and the Maquis in certain mountain areas, already marked by the arrival of Protestants during the Reformation (Boulet, 2008). Today, it is updated by new references, notably from anarchist anthropology, which reconsider the role of the mountains as a refuge in certain areas of the globe, where those who are “subordinate” escape the control of the state (Scott, 2013).
- 32 The memories of Alpine struggle serve as historical references for the actors in solidarity with the exiled people. They inform and legitimize their repertoire of actions. The theme of the mountain-refuge has recently been enriched by the theme of mountain hospitality. The humanistic grammar of hospitality (Agier, 2018) is mobilized almost uniformly by these actors and adds to a hegemonic discourse on the humanitarian urgency of the situation, which neglects the political conflicts that animate various components of the solidarity movement’s relationship with the exiled people. As Bessone (2015) points out, the philosophical ambiguity that embraces this notion makes it an effective operator for consensus-building and territorial marketing discourse (Chamard, 2014). Although mobilized in militant discourses, the notions of

hospitality and refuge can ultimately be used to contribute to a consensual and pacified narrative of territories. The trajectory of memories in the Clarée Valley clearly shows the economic issues in the work of local recollections. The current and wide-ranging writings on memory related to struggles at the border leave space for a similar economic instrumentalization. The prospect of new household comings, regular visits of the territory by volunteers who come to support local associations, and even “migrant tourism”¹⁸ are among the reasons for local institutions to shape their territorial marketing based on the ambiguous affirmation of the territory as a refuge and as a hospitable place.

The becoming-refuge of mountain areas

- 33 It is possible to link the processes by which territories are essentialized and memories consensualized to the more general trend of re-naturalizing spaces, which is taking place in some contemporary discourses around territorial struggles. It is common to read claims about defending the wooded countryside, the forest, or the mountain. All of these discourses are based on the idea of nature being separate from the rest of the world, as well as the presumed qualities of these spaces. This gesture rarely considers what is relational in the social and historical construction of these spaces and the trap of their romantic idealization.
- 34 Thus, territorial struggles can produce refuge territories that ultimately turn their singularity into an economic benefit and allow their differentiated integration into globalized economic flows. The instrumentalization of recent border crossings is the culmination of a persistent phenomenon of spectacularizing the borders (De Genova, 2013; Cuttita, 2015; Bachellerie, 2019) and, therefore, the “mountain.” The memory spectacle of the struggles in Clarée and the spectacle of the humanitarian rescue of exiled people both play a role in the political work of the mountain imaginary, which is fueled by the themes of refuge and hospitality. The mountains today do not seem to be more of a refuge for exiled people than any other space. However, their perception evolves with the re-actualization of Alpine memories and the dissemination of essentializing discourses.
- 35 In closing, a new hypothesis is formulated. If the refuge is no longer considered exclusively as a place of asylum for persecuted populations or for those who secede but rather as a place where, because of multiple interests, the spectacle of preserved nature and authenticity will be produced, then, in the context of metropolization and global warming that make areas where populations are currently concentrated less inhabitable, it is possible to predict that the Alps will become a refuge and that the “mountain” will become increasingly commodified. As elsewhere, the upper social classes are reaping the benefits of this commodification thanks to the socio-spatial segregation of underprivileged populations.

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NOTES

1. Henceforth abbreviated as Collectif Clarée (2003).
2. “Vers une larzacisation de la Clarée,” *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 7 June 1992 [Hautes-Alpes departmental archives]
3. <https://fresques.ina.fr/montagnes/fiche-media/Montag00047/discours-du-president-valery-giscard-d-estaing-a-vallouise.html>, accessed 17 April 2020
4. Davin Xavier, “1500 personnes pour la Clarée,” *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 7 August 1990 [Hautes-Alpes departmental archives]

5. Every year, the army privatizes a part of the Haute-Vallée for several weeks in order to train there. Artillery and infantry shooting is done in a vast area known as the “great shooting range of the Alps” and mainly used for hiking. In November 2019, 880 people, 40 trucks, six helicopters, fighter planes, and around 50 vehicles equipped with artillery systems were deployed there. [Municipal posting at the Névache town hall, “Avis de manœuvre militaire” published on 6 September 2019 by Colonel Emmanuel Devigne to the mayor, accessed 8 October 2019].
6. “NO TAV! – Émilie Carles, pioniera pacifica della Vallée de la Clarée”: <https://youtu.be/Lwk82CLDjBA>, accessed 17 April 2020
7. <http://www.collectifclaree.com/2012-Une-soupe-aux-herbes-sauvages.html>, accessed 17 April 2020
8. This paper can be downloaded at <https://www.hautesvallees.com/brochures-hautes-vallees-a-telecharger>, accessed 17 April 2020.
9. Quotations followed by a page number come from Carles (1992).
10. Vial Charles, “La vieille dame indigne de Val-des-Prés”, *Le Monde*, 16 August 1978.
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15. https://infokiosques.net/lire.php?id_article=1078, accessed 17 April 2020
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17. For example, C.C., “Montgenèvre : un an de prison ferme pour le passeur pakistanais”, *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, 11 February 2020, [online: <https://www.ledauphine.com/faits-divers-justice/2020/02/11/hautes-alpes-montgenevre-un-an-de-prison-ferme-pour-le-passeur-pakistanais>, accessed 17 April 2020].
18. Tourism that relies on the struggles of solidarity with the exiled to offer new tourism products. For example, this may involve creating partnerships between tourist reception structures and local associations or proposing hiking trails on “paths marked out (cairns) by the ‘no borders’ to help migrants” (<https://www.visorando.com/randonnee-no-borders-way>, accessed 17 April 2020).

ABSTRACTS

Toward the end of the 20th century, several major development projects that had been proposed in the Briançon area were defeated thanks to collective mobilization efforts. New initiatives now challenge the socio-spatial segregation of exiled people who are trying to cross the border amid the latter’s heavy militarization and in the context of the sensationalist coverage of events by the media. This article examines the discourses produced around these struggles, as well as people’s memories – in particular, that of Émilie Carles (1900–1979). The article considers their impact on

how the “mountain” is perceived and hypothesizes that it can play a role in the dynamics of how mountain spaces are essentialized and their inhabitants naturalized. We find that the theme of a “mountain-refuge” is reactivated and enriched by the political work done by local memories. Through a critical geography approach, this article carries out a political analysis of the figures of the mountain-refuge and links the issues of exile and ecology in order to contribute to thinking on the future of mountain areas.

INDEX

Keywords: mountain, refuge, exile, ecology, Émilie Carles, Hautes-Alpes

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